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# Predictors of Chinese College Students' Attitudes Toward Older Adults

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2012. This research was conducted with funding from semester and summer research grants from the Adrian Tinsley Program and the Shea Scholarship. Deana worked under the mentorship of Dr. Jing Tan and traveled to Shanghai, China with Dr. Tan to collect the data for this study. She presented at the 2012 Undergraduate Research Symposium at Bridgewater State University and the 2012 National and Conference on Undergraduate Research in Ogden, Utah. Deana hopes to further her studies at the graduate level and her career goal is to provide services as an Oncology Social Worker.

**H**istorically, filial piety has been a fundamental tenet in Chinese culture. Respecting older adults was expected in society and is an important principle of China's filial piety responsibility within its culture. However, demographic transformation and economic and social changes in rapidly modernizing societies challenge traditional values. Very little empirical research has examined the factors which influence the attitudes toward older adults among Chinese college students. The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that predict attitudes of Chinese college students toward the aging population.

**Methods:** Self-administrated anonymous survey questionnaires were distributed to a convenience sample of Chinese college students (N=380). The survey asked for basic demographic information and attitudes toward older adults; it was measured using the Aging Semantic Differential (ASD) scale. ASD scores range from 32 to 224. A lower score would suggest positive attitudes, while higher scores represented negative attitudes. A score of 128 would be neutral. Survey data was entered and analyzed using SPSS.

**Results:** ANOVA found that there was not a statistically significant difference in ASD mean scores among the three college-level groups of freshman/sophomore, junior/senior, and graduate students ( $F=1.02$ ,  $p=.959$ ). Pearson Correlation indicates that age is not associated with ASD scores ( $r=-0.61$ ,  $p=.242$ ). Independent t-tests found that there are not significant differences in mean ASD scores in terms of gender ( $t=-.20$ ,  $p=.984$ ) and major ( $t=-1.272$ ,  $p=.208$ ). However, there is a significance in the mean ASD score for students who do not have siblings and students who have siblings ( $t=2.259$ ,  $p=.025$ ). Students who have siblings ( $M=123.98$ ) have more positive attitudes toward older adults than those who are a single child ( $M=130.92$ ).

## Culture

Filial piety is a cultural attitude toward older people in the People's Republic of China. Filial piety, as defined by Deutsch (2004), is the hierarchy responsibility of adult children to care for elder parents in their home, assist financially, maintain social contact, ensure that their parents are happy, and to obey their parents unconditionally. This is reinforced by China's Confucian beliefs. In addition, women traditionally have the greatest impact on family members in many Asian cultures, as the mother's primary duty is to raise

the child and ensure that proper education is obtained. The mother's status and role is considered irreplaceable. Therefore, the central relationship of the family is not between the husband and wife as in the United States, but between the mother and child.

Over the past 50 years, family life in China has been strongly influenced by state policies. Prior to the 1990's, Chinese parent care was considered traditional to Confucianism and filial piety customs, as all children were required by law to physically and financially provide for their parents. On the other hand, elders affected by the "three- no's - no children, no income, and no relatives" (Zhan. H. J. et al. 2006, p. 98) were cared for in elder homes run by the public or government sector. However, during the mid to late 1990's, the elder care service industry began to grow. This enabled more children who could afford it to place their parents in care homes.

Conversely, increasing social pressure from neighbors and family members of the child to make enough money for the parents to live in care homes is mounting. The social pressures are influencing the changing cultural trend of elder's perception of filial piety to a more modern perspective. Emotional and physical contact is also still expected from the children to complete the filial piety obligation in the eyes of elders. However, the perception of how many times per month a child must have contact with their parent in order for the child to fulfill their filial piety obligation varies per elder, as reported by Zhan et al. (2008). In addition, China's one-child policy has caused additional stressors for the child of the family, who is obligated to make enough money to care for themselves, their own family (spouse and child), their parents, and in some cases in-laws and grandparents, which is considered the 4-2-1 rule or custom. This, in turn, may have implications for their intended career choice and attitude toward aging adults.

In addition, the current cohort of Chinese college students is the first generation that will feel the economic effect of the "one-family, one-child policy" that the Chinese government adopted in 1979. The policy encouraged people to delay having a child or to abort a pregnancy or sterilize oneself after their first child. This policy decreased China's population growth during the first twelve years from "33.4 per thousand to 22.28 per thousand in 1982" (Li & Rogers, 1999, p. 45). However, what was not expected was the increased life expectancy of the elder population, especially the over 86.7 million individuals now seeking assistance (Tan et. al, 2004). This has caused a shortage of the younger generation to care for the elders as expected by their cultural norm obligations of filial piety; it may also affect their perspective toward older adults.

Zhan et al. (2008) report that elder care practice is changing as the elder population of baby boomers or "third agers" are more financially secure and independent than previous generations (p. 543). The third agers also are showing a trend of choosing not to live with adult children, but to live alone or with their spouses. This may be because expected caregivers are becoming less available to care for the elders due to smaller family size, globalization, work conflicts, and family obligations, all as a result of the one-child policy.

In addition, the qualitative study by Zhan et al. (2008) indicates that more and more older adults are choosing to live in care homes in China. The top three reasons found for elder institutionalization are (a) their family is too busy to care for them, (b) the level of the elder's disability may require special needs, and (c) there are housing shortages in China. The study also shows that placement of elders into care homes fulfills the child's filial piety responsibility, per the elder, as long as the parent is happy. However, the biggest deterrent to care-home living is cost, as most workers' monthly pay is less than half the amount it costs per month to reside in a care home. This in turn puts additional pressure on the adult child to make more money to ensure proper care for their 4-2-1 customary responsibility, and in turn, may affect one's perspective toward older adults.

The effects of the one-child policy and the abundance of baby boomers retiring could have a damaging effect on the aging population as well as China's economic status if society does not provide for the aging population. Institutional policies may help ease the effects by creating more long-term nursing houses and providing training for services workers with livable wages. However, questions arise, such as, will there be enough workers available to assist the elderly due to the one-child policy? If not, how will society care for the aging population? If so, what influences contribute to a positive attitude toward older adults among the current cohort of college students? How can society strengthen the desire of this generation of available workers to care for the aging population?

### **Attitude Predictors**

Research found that parenting styles, cultural norms, and honor are themes that affect one's attitude toward the aging population. Many ideas of older adults (defined as over 50 years of age in this paper) held by younger people are ambivalent, not only in China but internationally. A study performed by Zhou (2007) reports that college students sampled in Illinois, United States generally have a neutral or negative attitude toward aging adults. It is further explained that development of one's perception of aging adults is the product of various forces that take place within a person's life, as well as lack of

intergenerational contact. The lack of contact may be due to the high rate of modernization in family dynamics, including the United States' high divorce rate and migration away from family members due to globalization.

Kuang et al. (2010) conducted a study of 628 American and 428 Chinese undergraduate college students' filial attitudes toward the aging population using the filial attitude instrument. The results imply that nature versus nurture influences one's attitude toward aging population. The results further indicate that American culture does not value filial responsibility as highly as Chinese culture does. These results also point out that Chinese college students have a higher value of collectivism and view it as strength, whereas Western students value individualism and independence. That cultural value of independence in the United States may account for more negatively scaled perspectives toward the aging population among American college students.

A comparison study of 119 Chinese college students (from Capitol University of Economics & Business and from Beijing University) and 199 American college students (from Northern Kentucky University) was completed by Li & Rogers (1999) in 1995. The study examines the two cultures' attitudes toward the aging population and care arrangements for the older population after their retirement. The results indicate that a higher number of Chinese students expect to live in close proximity to their parents, whereas 34% of American students expect to live at least one hour away from their parents. Further results indicate that Chinese students feel their parents should live with their child(ren) and the majority of American students feel that their parents should live in a nursing home if they are not able to maintain and reside in their own home. The study shows that American college students have different perspectives and cultural attitudes about caring for their parents or the aging population than students in China do.

In a bivariate correlation analysis of 199 Chinese college students aged 18-26 years conducted by Tan, P. et. al (2004), it was determined that college students' attitudes toward older adults were contingent on the amount of intimacy and contact that younger people have with older people throughout their life span. The different generations reveal diverse thoughts, cultures, power, historical time, and individual understanding throughout their lives. Consequently, the younger cohort's attitude toward their society's aging population is vitally important to not only their country's economic success, but to the social fluency and trepidation of the aging population. College students' attitudes toward older adults are important to the People's Republic of China because they are the next generation of workers in China and are essential to the care and success of the aging population.

### **Significance of the Study and Research Question**

As today's cohort of Chinese college students starts to graduate from college, questions of where they will live, when they will start a family, and how they will care for their elderly parents arise. The current college-student generation has been not only affected by the one-child policy but by the high number of baby boomers that are in the process of retiring. China must take a look at who will care for this population and how that care will affect the country's economic state.

This study sought to determine attitudes of Chinese college students about familial obligations and societal services expected to be available to care for China's aging population. If it were found that the cohort of college students has negative attitudes toward the aging population, they may not want to work with this population. Therefore, society may need to encourage more studies in social work, medical fields, and direct service work to help with the growing elder population. Furthermore, this study aimed to provide understanding about why college students' attitudes are important to the economic state of China, the future of elder care, and the effects of China's one-child policy, as well as modernization in China.

### **Methodology**

#### **Recruitment of Participants**

Self-administrated anonymous survey questionnaires were distributed to a convenience sample of Chinese college students (N=380) at Shanghai Normal University. The survey asked basic demographic information and attitudes toward older adults; it was measured using the Aging Semantic Differential scale (ASD). The participants were asked if they wanted to participate in a research project to help determine college students' attitudes toward aging adults, and they were informed that all surveys were anonymous. Convenience samples were collected from several classrooms after access was granted by the professors. Random samples were additionally collected from participants who were approached in the university's quad, sports field, and library.

#### **Measurements**

Attitudes toward aging adults were measured using the Aging Semantic Differential (ASD) scale. The ASD, created by Rosencranz and McNevin (1969), is the most widely used Likert scale to measure young peoples' attitudes toward older adults. The scale consists of 32 sets of descriptive words such as *productive* and *unproductive*, *strong* and *weak*, and *handsome* and *ugly*. Each participant was asked to place a check mark on the seven-level scales to measure their immediate feelings about aging adults. The participants were also instructed to make sure each series was answered and that only one check mark per series was visible. ASD scores range from 32 to 224. Lower

scores suggest positive attitudes, while higher scores represent negative attitudes. A score of 128 is neutral. The ASD scale was redefined in 2003 by Polizzi, but the validity of the updated scale was called into question by Gonzales, Tan, and Morrow-Howell (2010) as they were not able to prove the instrument was measuring what it was intended to measure.

The independent variables were age, sex, grade or level in college, number of siblings, and major of study. The major of study was further recoded into Major 1. Major 1 consists of the four undergraduate colleges at Bridgewater State University. This was done for clarity as majors in China are divided into different tracks than in the United States. The colleges are as follows: College of Humanities and Social Sciences 1, College of Science and Mathematics 2, College of Education and Allied Studies 3, and Ricciardi College of Business 4, per American standards. After high school graduation, students are required to take China's national test and are placed in either the Liberal Arts or Science track depending on their test scores. Therefore, each participant's major of study was further recoded into Major 2, which consists of Liberal Arts or Science. The recode into Major 2 is to conform to Chinese academic standards.

### Data Analysis

Survey data were entered and analyzed using SPSS. Univariate analysis was performed to describe the demographic characteristic of survey respondents. Bivariate analysis (T-test, ANOVA, and correlations) were performed to test the relationship between demographic variables and ASD score.

### Results

The descriptive statistics show that 30.8% of the participants are male and 69.2 % female. The participants' college grade levels are as follows: 15.5% freshmen, 15.8% sophomores, 51.6% juniors, 3.7% seniors, and 13.4% graduate students. Thirty-four percent of the participants are only children, and 66 % have one or more sibling. The participants reported that they are enrolled in the following colleges at the university: 47.7% in the College of Humanities and Social Science, 24.7% in the College of Science & Mathematics, 20.8% in the College of Education & Allied Studies, and 6.8% in the College of Business. The mean age of the participants was 21.5974, with a standard deviation of 2.19582 and a range of 18 to 36 years of age. The ASD scores of Chinese college students are neutral, with a Mean score of 128.61 and a standard deviation of 26.11. See Table 1 for details.

Independent t-tests found that there are no significant differences in mean ASD scores in terms of gender ( $t = -.20$ ,  $p = .984$ ) and major ( $t = -1.272$ ,  $p = .208$ ). However, there is a difference in the mean ASD score for students who do not have

**Table 1 - Descriptive Characteristics of Respondents (N=380)**

Categorical Variables	f.	%
Gender	Male	117
	Female	263
Grade	Freshmen	59
	Sophomore	60
	Junior	196
	Senior	14
	Graduate	51
Siblings	No	129
	Yes	251
Major	Humanities & Social Science	181
	Science & Mathematics	94
	Education & Allied Studies	79
	Business	26
Continuous Variable	Mean (SD)	Range
Age	21.5974 (2.19582)	18.00 – 36.00

siblings and students who have siblings ( $t = 2.259$ ,  $p = .025$ ). Students who have siblings ( $M = 123.98$ ) have more positive attitudes toward older adults than those who are the single child ( $M = 130.92$ ). See Table 2 for details.

ANOVA tests performed indicate that there was not a statistically significant difference of ASD mean scores among

**Table 2 - T-test results indicate differences of ASD (N=380)**

	ASD		t-value
	Mean	SD	
Gender			
	Male (N= 114)	128.5702	25.43462
	Female (N=259)	128.6293	26.44567
Major 2			
	Liberal Arts (N=131)	126.3696	26.62145
	Science (N=235)	129.9277	25.76568
Siblings			
	Yes (N=124)	123.9839	29.74198
	No (N=249)	130.9157	23.82389

\*  $p < .05$

the college grade levels and majors  $F=1.02$ ,  $p=.959$ . See Table 3 for additional details.

**Table 3 - ANOVA results indicate differences of ASD (N=380)**

	ASD		F Value
	Mean	SD	
<b>Grade</b>			
Freshman/ Sophomore	126.5391	24.71532	.606
Junior/ Senior	129.7536	24.86433	
Graduate	129.7400	32.80668	
<b>Major</b>			
Humanities & Social Sciences	128.0337	26.09065	.103
Science and Mathematics	129.2979	26.91397	
Education & Allied Studies	128.4545	24.44518	
Business	130.7083	29.53330	

Pearson Correlation indicates that age is not associated with ASD scores ( $r = -0.61$ ,  $p=.242$ ).

## Discussion

The results of the study were surprising. It was found that the participants' major did not correlate with how they felt about the aging population. This was unexpected because it was thought by the researcher that one's desire to obtain an education in a helping field such as social work or medicine versus a business field would reflect how one felt about the aging population. However, no significance was found. An even more surprising result is that ASD scores of participants who have siblings are much lower than the scores of those who do not have siblings. This result was surprising because it was expected that filial piety would be greater for a single child due to the responsibilities expected by them in accordance with Chinese cultural standards. Unexpectedly, age, gender, and college grade were also found not significant. These results were quite interesting as modernization and globalization is affecting the Chinese college students' concepts of culture and filial responsibility.

Limitations of the study were found. There was an unbalanced number of males (30.8%) and females (69.2%); the majority of the participants were juniors in college (51.6%); and the majority of the probability sample were in the humanities and arts classified major 1 (47.7%). Another limitation that may have been a factor, but was not measured, is that this is the first reported study of the ASD being used in China as a measurement tool. The ASD is reported to have validity, but ethnically geared toward Caucasian samples. Therefore,

the results may be skewed due to differences in cultural perspective and multidimensional attitudes. However, for best practice reasoning, the ASD scale was translated into Chinese for the participants to complete with ease. Then, the results were translated back to English. The translation may also be considered a limitation as some of the meaning of the ASD may have been lost during translation. Finally, the demographics in the ASD do not pertain directly to Asian culture; therefore, full analysis could not be conducted as some information was not disclosed in the survey, such as whether the participants were from rural or urban areas in China.

Areas for future study include research into where the families of the participants come from. Whether participants were raised in rural or urban settings could have an effect on ASD scores. Further studies could also focus on the number of siblings the participants have, not just whether or not they have any siblings. The size of one's family of origin could affect one's attitude about the aging population. Future research may give additional insight into how the one-child policy and modernization have affected China's economic conditions, cultural traditions, and sense of collectivism.

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